



The Jewish Community of M'Zab, Algeria, in France

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With generous support from the CES Pre-dissertation Fellowship, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, I had the opportunity to visit archives in Aix-en-Provence, Paris and Strasbourg, France, during the summer of 2010. As a result of the conversations I had in France with archivists, Jewish communal leaders and scholars, as well as with the preliminary sources I consulted in state and private archives, I radically altered and expanded the plans for my dissertation. The advantages afforded me by this pre-dissertation research trip were many, but most importantly, my research in France pushed me to ask new, exciting and fundamentally different questions of my dissertation topic.

Whereas my original dissertation topic focused on the relationship between the French state and French Jewish community with the Jewish community of M'Zab, Algeria, after the Second World War, my amended dissertation now expands this dialectic to include the state of Israel and the Vichy period. I believe my newly reframed dissertation, entitled "Saharan Jews: The Jewish Community of Ghardaïa, Algeria, 1939–1967," will expand current historiography about the experience of Algerian Jews under French colonial rule, demonstrating that an important segment of Algerian Jewry did not immigrate to France at the end of French colonial Algeria, that this emigration began before the Algerian War, and that Zionism *did* make significant inroads in French Algeria. While the majority of Algerian Jews departed Algeria in the summer of 1962 for France, the Jews of the M'Zab immigrated almost entirely to Israel and began doing so more than a decade before the end of the Algerian War.

One of the core assumptions of my original dissertation project, gleaned from the meager secondary source material available on this Jewish community, was that the Jewish community from the M'Zab resettled in France. However, while parsing through primary source material at the archives of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in Paris, I came across several letters and memoranda in the *Fonds Jacques Lazarus* that indicated that the Jewish community from the M'Zab found life in France

intolerable and migrated again to Israel as early as 1964, two years after their initial exodus from Algeria. Charles Kleinknecht, the former French administrator of Ghardaïa, wrote in his memoirs that soon after their immigration to Strasbourg, the Chief Rabbi of Strasbourg called the Mozabite Jews “berbères judaïsés,” who were exceedingly difficult to integrate into the preexisting Ashkenazi community. The succeeding rabbi suggested to Kleinknecht that these individuals should be moved to Israel because their integration in Strasbourg was too difficult. Further research and conversations with Jewish leaders and archivists confirmed that the Jews from the M’Zab left Strasbourg soon after their immigration from Algeria.

At the *Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer* (CAOM) in Aix-en-Provence, census data taken in Southern Algeria as early as 1948 revealed that the Jewish community from the M’Zab began immigration to Israel as soon as they were able. Between 1948 and 1960, the Jewish population shrank rapidly enough that French colonial officials in the *Départements du Sud* began intensive surveillance of the Jewish community, noting any fluctuations in that population. Jewish Agency operatives were active in Ghardaïa as early as 1954, where they were a constant irritant to the local military commanders. Approximately 500–600 Jews from Ghardaïa immigrated to Israel between 1948 and 1955, much to the chagrin of the French military commander, who complained of the propaganda “faite par l’Etat d’Israël” to encourage emigration.¹ If Jews from Ghardaïa were emigrating prior to 1954, we cannot then characterize their flight as a mere side effect of the larger Algerian War, as historians have characterized the immigration of Algerian Jews to France in 1962. Thus, it appears that different factors were at play in the M’Zab, which encouraged this earlier Jewish emigration.

The unique trajectory of this Jewish community can account for part of this divergence from the history of the majority of Algerian Jewry.

1 Memo confidentiel à M. le Lieutenant-Colonel, Commandant Militaire du Territoire de Ghardaïa, 1956, CAOM 22H92.

Jews living in the northern Sahara, along the Oued (valley) M’Zab, did not acquire French citizenship at the same time that Algerian Jews living in the *départements* of Algiers, Constantine and Oran did as a result of the 1870 Crémieux Decree. Not until after the French ‘pacification’ of the Sahara and the M’Zab valley in 1882 did the Jews in Ghardaïa acquire French nationality. However, like Algerian Muslims and Berbers, they were not emancipated at this time. Instead, the Jews of Ghardaïa and the M’Zab maintained their personal Jewish (*mosaïque*) religious status and could request French citizenship on an individual basis, just as their (male, property-owning) Muslim and Berber neighbors could.

During my research at the CAOM, I was intrigued to discover that although mass naturalization would have allowed access to French universities, voting rights and military or civic service, very few Jews from the M’Zab petitioned for French citizenship until the fall of French colonial rule in Algeria became apparent. In May 1960, the Jewish community of Ghardaïa petitioned the local French colonial administration for the extension of the Crémieux Decree to the south of Algeria.² This request for the “accession de l’ensemble de la communauté au statut civil de droit commun” was quickly recommended to the general military command in nearby Laghouat.³ They were soon after emancipated *en masse* in 1961. By June 1, 1962, there were 900 Jews left in Ghardaïa and by the end of that month, none remained.⁴ Here, briefly, the history of this community dovetails with the larger history of Jews in Algeria, as both groups left Algeria in the summer of 1962.

2 Letter from “Conseiller Municipal de la fraction Israelite de Ghardaïa, Adjoint au Maire, Rabbins, Notables et Membres de la Communauté Israelite du M’Zab” to “M. le Ministre du Sahara,” Ghardaïa, May 30, 1960, CAOM 22H93.

3 Communication #180/C de l’Administrateur des Services Civils, Chef du Cercle, a Monsieur le Préfet du Département des Oasis, Secrétariat General a Laghouat, June 1, 1960, CAOM 22H93.

4 Thomas F. Brady, “Half of Jews in Algeria Reported to have Fled,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1962.

However, quickly after their arrival in France, the vast majority of Jews from the M'Zab went on to board ships and planes bound for Israel.

The research I conducted in France suggests that the Jews of the M'Zab manipulated emancipation to serve their ultimate goal of immigration to Israel, a goal that diverged sharply from the interests of the French state. The commencement of Jewish immigration to Israel prior to the Algerian War indicates that this minority population emigrated as soon as a viable alternative to life under French colonial rule presented itself. It is my hope that my study of this particular history will contribute to further understandings of the fraught relationships between the French state and minority groups in its Empire, as well as the innovative ways individuals and collectives created new meanings for citizenship in the turbulent decades following the Second World War.

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